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ABSTRACT

This study examined the co-curricular involvement of 80 honors students at a large mid-western institution and the amount and type of their commitment to activities and organizations. The population studied consisted of 672 students in the honors program at Bowling Green State University (Ohio) in all stages of their college careers from freshmen to seniors. Students received mailed questionnaires asking about activities, organizations and leadership positions that they had participated in at the university. Of this population, 80 students, or 11.9 percent, responded. Respondents reported a high level of involvement in 78.8 percent of cases, a moderate involvement in 18.7 percent of cases, and only two students reported participating in only one activity. Overall, responses indicated that the majority of honors students are highly involved, especially in the Honors Students Association, academic honor societies and other departmental groups, community service, athletics, and music. Implications of the study support the need for Honors Programs' intervention in students' personal and social development as well as their academic achievement. (Contains 14 references.) (JB)

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Co-Curricular Involvement Characteristics of Bowling Green State University Honors Students

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Abstract

University honors programs are typically examined and compared for their academic standards, admissions criteria, and curriculum. Honors students' lives outside of the college classroom have been neglected in but a few comprehensive reports. The following study examined the co-curricular involvement of 80 honors students at a large mid-western institution in regards to the amount and type of their commitment to activities and organizations. Responses indicate that the majority of honors students are highly involved, especially in the Honors Student Association; academic honor societies and other departmental groups; community service; athletics; and music. Implications of the study support the need for Honors Programs' intervention in students' personal and social development as well as their academic achievement.

Co-Curricular Involvement Characteristics of Bowling Green State University Honors Students

Many researchers have examined the characteristics of honors students' academic profiles (Clements, 1974; Friedman & Jenkins-Friedman, 1986; Kegel, 1980; Piland & Gould, 1982). They have documented the average criteria for admission into honors programs and the curriculum schools follow with these high achieving students. Even the personalities of honors students have been documented as having a strong need for achievement, approval and autonomy (Palmer & Wohl, 1972). However, on only a few occasions have the personal and social lives of honors students been examined for common characteristics. It is the purpose of this paper to add to the small body of literature about the "other side" of students' development, namely their co-curricular involvements in college.

Astin (1994) informs us of the importance, and indeed the very necessity of our students' involvements outside of the classroom. We must be certain of our support of this facet of a students life because it is perhaps the single most important factor influencing a student's persistence in college. Having an excellent academic record does not ensure success, however. Astin believes that being involved with an honors curriculum also increases the chances of an individual's staying power. Involvement theory, as it is known in the field of student affairs, was most clearly articulated in Astin's (1985) research, where he states simply, "students learn by becoming involved . . ." (p. 133). Defining involvement broadly is helpful in understanding the many ways students can learn. They may find involvement in the classroom with small group discussions and innovative teaching methods; in the research lab working one-on-one with a faculty member; in a campus job; in an intramural sport; or in a combination of these activities.

Clearly, "involvement" is a complex formula as unique to an individual as their personality. This study focused on just one factor of that involvement that affects student learning and persistence--involvement in co-curricular activities.

A review of the history of honors programs allows us to note why honors students lives outside of the classroom have been neglected in the literature. The goal of honors programs in the 1980s was to create academic environments that nourished the intellectual lives of students (Gabelnick, 1986). Even so, it was found that honors students were not exempt from difficulties in school such as career indecision as a result of their multiple interests and talents (Schroer & Dorn, 1986). During the late 1980s, researchers noted that honors students needed and expected a different mode of guidance that was interested in them as whole persons, not just academic ones (Kelley & Lynch, 1991).

Having established the need to recognize the whole student, a number of researchers did spend a portion of their greater research projects on the extracurricular involvements of students and found somewhat conflicting results. (The word 'co-curricular' has replaced 'extracurricular' in this article because the author feels that the importance of these activities for the college student has equal standing with the academic curriculum; we know that the activities do not stand on the periphery of the students' lives as 'extra' implies.) Clements' research (1974) unnoticed and untested until the mid 1980s was the first to report that the higher the honors rating of the student, the greater the number of interests and extracurricular activities. Mathiasen (1985), too, found that, compared to nonhonors students, honors students have a greater number of interests and participate in more extracurricular activities. Randall and Copeland's (1986-87) study, however, suggests that honors students are more introverted and thus, are not interested in extracurricular activities. The latest research, conducted by Gerrity, Lawrence, & Sedlacek (1993) supports Mathiasen's work. They state, "Honors students are more

interested that nonhonors in nonacademic activities such as joining campus clubs" (p.51). Gerrity et. al also suggest that an honors living and learning environment where high achieving students can have social interaction with other honors students may offer the best of both worlds. Their suggestion supports the idea that honors students are also interested in academic affiliations and organizations. Day (1989) echoes honors students need to know that ". . .they are not alone in their drive" (p. 354).

In summary, the previous research on honors students began with an examination of their intellectual pursuits and academic demographics. It progressed by noting that these students were not free from difficulties in college and desired attention to their personalities, interests, and activities outside of the classroom. Of late, researchers have conducted broad assessments of the honors students' demographics, attitudes, and interests in hopes of creating a comprehensive profile of who our honors students are today. In regards to their co-curricular interests, the majority of the studies have yielded support for the notion that honors students are highly involved with co-curricular activities.

This study continued the trend in finding out more about what students do with their time outside of the classroom. It was designed to further test the conflicting literature on involvement in extracurricular involvement. More specifically, it asked the questions, "What is the level of involvement in co-curricular activities and organizations of high-achieving students? and "With what kinds of activities do honors students spend their time? of Bowling Green State University (BGSU) honors students. In order to ask these questions, a few definitions must be understood. High involvement meant being involved in four or more activities and organizations; moderate involvement meant being involved in two to three co-curricular activities or organizations; and low involvement meant being involved in none or one co-curricular activity or organization. The following

report proposes to illuminate those levels of involvement for BGSU honors students and the types of co-curricular commitments they are making outside of the classroom.

Method

The population studied consisted of students in the honors program at Bowling Green State University in all stages of their college careers from freshmen to seniors. Students are accepted into the program with above 3.5 overall GPAs in high school, strong ACT and SAT test scores, and extensive co-curricular involvement. In order to maintain honors program status, the student must maintain a cumulative 3.0 GPA in their undergraduate course work.

Each year, a questionnaire is sent to honors students at the end of the academic year asking them to record the activities, organizations, and leadership positions in which they have participated at the university (see Appendix A). The questionnaire is sent out for the purposes of updating the students' file so that staff can readily write a letter of recommendation for that student and also to obtain possible honors scholarship candidates. The questionnaire contains a question about awards, scholarships, and honoraries which was not used for this study. It is the information from the self-report responses of the co-curricular related questions only which were used for the subsequent study.

In 1995, 672 questionnaires were sent through campus mail to honors students. 80 were returned either by personal delivery to the office or through the campus mail system for a response rate of 11.9%. The questionnaires were reviewed and coded into the categories of high, moderate, and none-low involvement depending on the number of activities, organizations, and leadership positions they recorded. If a student was a member and also a leader of an organization, they were both considered a single activity.

The individual cases were also reviewed for the type of co-curricular activities in which they were involved. The categories Honors Student Association, Academic/ Department/Tutoring, Student Government, Music, Athletics, Service, and Other (Religious, Cultural, Student Life, Newspaper, 4-H, Political and Greek organizations). If the student mentioned "tennis" and "intramural volleyball," the category "Athletics" was checked once. If they mentioned "Volunteers in Progress" and "Soup Kitchen," the category "Service" was checked once. This strategy was used to get purer results regarding the diversity of the activities in which they were involved, not necessarily the magnitude (quantity) of each of those commitments.

Results

Students reported a high level of involvement in 78.8% of the 80 cases (n = 63) (see Table 1). In 18.7% (n = 15) of the cases did the student respond that they were moderately involved and in only 2.5% (n = 2) of the cases did the student report participating in one activity.

Insert Table 1 about here

Students reported a variety of types of involvement (see Table 2). 68.8% were involved in Academic, Departmental, or Tutoring groups ranging from national honor societies such as Phi Eta Sigma and Alpha Lambda Delta to Beta Beta Beta, a biology honor society. 63.8% of the students reported membership in the Honors Student Association, a student organization affiliated with the BGSU Honors Program whose programs are meant to be intellectually stimulating and fun. 61.3% of the students reported participation in an Other type of organization such as a group for Jewish students; gay, lesbian, and bisexual students; writing for the college newspaper;

membership in a Greek organization to name a few. 38.8% cited participation in a Community Service group or project while 32.5% said they were involved in Athletics such as an intramural sport, varsity sport, or coaching experience. 21.3% reported involvement in Music ranging from musical societies to church choirs. 17.5% claimed to be a part of Student Government, usually an elected position in the Undergraduate Student Senate or their residence hall governments.

Insert Table 2 about here

Discussion

The results obtained in this research support the majority of the research done on the extracurricular interests of honors students (Clements, 1974; Gerrity et. al, 1993; Mathiasen, 1985). Informal research by Day (1989) was also supported by the overwhelming majority of students who participate in and enjoy activities with other honors students and in academically related co-curricular endeavors.

Information gathered here also shows the diversity of the interests within this honors program. All categories evidenced some level of participation the highest being the Academic and Departmental organizations followed by the Honors Student Association. From these findings we can consider the great importance of organizations sponsored by honors programs and the departments which support their curriculum to conduct a large level of programming where students of like ability can interact and challenge each other. Community Service participation was also high, not surprising given the both increasing desire on the part of students to contribute to their communities and the institution's emphasis on students setting themselves apart. With so many talents and interests, these students are being successful as well-rounded individuals, yet we can not

hypothesize or generalize as to which variable causes the other. Perhaps it is a complex interplay of academic and co-curricular challenges which allow the honors student to strive toward their greatest potential.

Numerous limitations render this study non-generalizable to the greater population of honors students. The return rate of the questionnaire, for example, leaves us wondering why the other 592 honors students didn't answer the form. Some possibilities include: (1) they didn't have time to fill out the questionnaire because they are very heavily involved, (2) they don't see the value of reporting their accomplishments outside of the classroom, (3) they don't anticipate asking for recommendations from the office staff or (4) they had nothing to write on the questionnaire because they aren't involved in any co-curricular activities.

Other limitations are evident in the self-reporting on questionnaires and the methods used to interpret the data. Students may have lied about their activities or forgotten something with which they are involved. Secondly, they may not have understood the meanings or broad nature of the terms "activities" and "organizations." For example, they may not have reported their campus job as an activity. Thirdly, the instructions on the top of the questionnaire may lead them to believe that if they completed the form last year, they only need to update the form by adding current year activities.

The procedure used to categorize involvement was subject to the researcher's interpretation of high, moderate, and low involvement. Perhaps someone else would consider involvement in one activity moderate involvement, while another wouldn't consider placing someone without ten co-curricular involvement in the high involvement category. Also, the level of involvement may not be able to be characterized by the sheer

number of activities. For example, a varsity tennis player devotes 25 hours/week to practice and is rated as having low involvement while someone in five student organizations which take up a total of five hours/week. One might, with ample reason, consider the tennis player to be more involved in a single co-curricular activity.

Implications

The research reported here, while not generalizable, can offer some impetus for further research to be conducted in this area. It would be interesting to note how the involvement characteristics manifest themselves depending on the philosophy of individual honors programs around the country. In other words, are some admissions profiles considered better than others depending on the types of activities in which the individual has involved themselves? How does this, then, affect what activities a student will pursue in college? Another area of research could investigate the number of hours an honors student spends in the classroom and studying compared to the hours they spend in non-academic activities. Additionally, high levels of involvement were reported but they were not correlated with the academic standing of the individual. Further research might take on the task of re-testing Clements findings to see if a higher honors rating means higher involvement. Obviously, there is much research still to be done on the nature of the honors students' life.

The research also lends itself well for imagining the possibilities for progressive and continued educational interventions with honors students. Because honors students are interested in participating in activities with other highly motivated achievers, steps should be taken to ensure ample opportunities for them to live together, socialize together, relax together, and intellectually stimulate each other in classes, their residence halls, special seminars, and trips. Their unique situations and level of achievement deserve

special attention--personal attention, in academic advising as well as personal counseling for their issues and personalities are not the same as nonhonors students.

An unexpected application of these findings would be to use involvement theory to inform our practices with students who are experiencing academic difficulty. If we believe that involvement is the key to student learning, then we would surely want to share and implement that philosophy with all students, regardless of their abilities.

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Table 1

Levels of Co-Curricular Involvement of BGSU Honors Students

Level	Frequency (n)*	Ratio
High Involvement (4 or more activities/organizations)	63	78.8%
Moderate Involvement (2-3 activities/organizations)	15	18.7%
None-Low Involvement (0-1 activities/organizations)	2	2.5%

* N = 80

Table 2

Types of Co-Curricular Involvement of BGSU Honors Students

Activity/Organization	Frequency (n)*	Ratio (/N)
Honors Student Association	51	63.8%
Academic Honor Societies/ Departmental Groups/tutoring	55	68.8%
Community Service	31	38.8%
Athletics	26	32.5%
Music	17	21.3%
Student Government	14	17.5%
Other Religious/Cultural/Orientation-Student Life/ Newspaper/Greek/4-H/Political	49	61.3%

* N = 80

Appendix A

Honors Program
Activity Questionnaire

Please take a few moments to fill out this form. The Honors Program will ask you to update it each year for your file. It is a valuable tool for the staff in writing letters of recommendation and in knowing what honors students are involved in on campus. Please return by April 20th. Thank you!

Name:

Local Address:

Major:

When do you expect to graduate?

Please list activities and organizations in which you have participated at BGSU.

Please list the leadership positions you have held at BGSU.

Please list your awards, scholarships, and honoraries.